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ABSTRACT

England and Wales introduced a site-based management system in 1988, which delegated the responsibility for strategic planning from school boards to individual schools. This paper describes the kinds of planning approaches used by schools in this new context. Data were obtained from a survey of 106 teachers enrolled in a graduate-level education management and administration course. The teachers represented 15 different school boards. Findings indicate that approximately one-half of the schools: (1) utilized an ad hoc planning approach; (2) failed to consciously link the school's strategic-planning objectives with resource allocation; and (3) lacked a systemic process for evaluating progress toward policy implementation. In about two-thirds of the schools, action plans were incomplete. If schools are to grasp the strategic initiative offered by further decentralization, the central government should conduct a thorough review of the probable systemwide impact of the English government's increasingly "laissez faire" attitudes toward site-based planning. Contains 22 references. (LMI)

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"SCHOOL-BASED PLANNING: ARE UK SCHOOLS GRASPING THE STRATEGIC INITIATIVE?"

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SCHOOL-BASED PLANNING: ARE UK SCHOOLS GRASPING THE STRATEGIC INITIATIVE?

BY CORRIE GILES.

Abstract

With the introduction in 1988 of a system of site-based management in England and Wales, schools are now operating in a radically altered planning context in which responsibility for strategic planning has been delegated from school boards to individual schools.

Although school development planning has been widely adopted by school boards in the UK as a rational approach to site-based planning, indicative research reported in this paper suggests that strategic planning in a sample of schools operating in the newly decentralized environment has been slower to develop in practice than originally anticipated.

As further legislation in the UK enhances independence, choice and competition in a market driven educational environment, evidence of a lack of a coherent planning process in schools casts doubt on their ability to operate successfully in the strategic vacuum created by the gradual demise of school boards.

The paper also suggests that if schools are to take full advantage of the opportunities offered by site-based management to plan and sustain their own long-term improvement and development, a thorough review may be needed by Central Government of their existing "laissez faire" attitudes towards site-based planning, if there is not to be considerable long-term damage to the national education service as a whole.

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SCHOOL-BASED PLANNING: ARE UK SCHOOLS GRASPING THE STRATEGIC INITIATIVE?

BY CORRIE GILES.

THE CHANGING PLANNING CONTEXT IN ENGLAND AND WALES

The period from 1988-1993 has seen the passing of three major Education Acts which have fundamentally altered the planning context for schools in England and Wales. In essence the British Government have enacted a national legislative framework intended to increase efficiency, improve the quality of teaching and learning, and promote the accountability and responsiveness of a much more diverse public school system, through increased competition and greater parental choice.

The main vehicle for implementing such a radical educational framework was the introduction in the 1988 Education Reform Act of a form of site-based management known as Local Management of Schools (LMS). LMS fundamentally altered the traditional planning relationship between central government, school boards and schools by delegating resources and the responsibility for decision making to the point of delivery. With LMS considerably reducing the planning powers of local school boards, schools needed to take responsibility for strategic planning at school level in order to operate successfully in a decentralized environment.

THE EVOLUTION OF SCHOOL-BASED PLANNING

Although the importance of site-based strategic planning was recognised and encouraged at the outset of the LMS initiative (Coopers and Lybrand, 1988; Fidler and Bowles, 1989; Davies and Braund, 1989; Fidler, Bowles and Hart 1991), site-based management did not entirely free schools to plan the use of their delegated resources. The Department of Education and Science (DES) Circular 7/88, the official guidance for the introduction of LMS schemes in England and Wales, envisaged a continuing, albeit transitional, strategic planning role for school boards during the change to site-based management.

Wallace (1991a) suggests that five key factors influenced school boards to embrace the school development planning (SDP) approach to site-based planning during the LMS transition:

* the need to collect a wide range of information as evidence for the DES that centrally imposed reform was being effectively implemented;
* the need to develop a means of monitoring progress in their schools, and provide support and advice in implementing the new legislation;
* the need to respond to Central Government controls imposed by legislation, statutory orders and "earmarked" development grants which required specific plans from schools, including a staff development plan, a financial management plan and a National Curriculum development plan;
* the residual power retained by school boards to insist that

their schools had a SDP, and allowed some school boards to retain a surprising degree of control over the form and focus of site-based planning in their schools;

* the considerable professional interest in the SDP approach to site-based planning promoted by the DES funded "School Development Plans Project" (DES, 1989; DES, 1991), and supported in some of the key UK literature on school improvement at that time (Holly and Southworth, 1989; Hopkins, 1991; Hargreaves and Hopkins, 1991; West and Ainscow, 1991; Davies and Ellison, 1992).

THE BENEFITS OF SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT PLANS

The literature supporting the SDP approach to site-based planning typically portrays the SDP as a flexible working document which is reviewed at least annually, and is therefore, responsive to changing circumstances. It brings together the medium-term priorities for change in a school, and although reflecting national, school board and school policies, is primarily concerned with identifying and implementing a limited number of whole-school improvements and developments. At their best SDPs provide documentary evidence of a coherent strategic, tactical and operational planning process in which:

* the strategic aims and objectives of the school are linked to planning priorities identified in the SDP, and in turn to action plans concerned with implementation;
* tactical priorities in the SDP are systematically

identified and resourced as part of a coherent planning cycle which links the planning and budgetary process to detailed action plans concerned with implementation;

* operational action plans support implementation of the SDP by specifying targets, identifying success criteria, establishing a time scale for completion, naming the people responsible for carrying out the plan and they provide a framework for monitoring, evaluating and controlling progress.

The SDP process can also encourage a collegiate/participatory approach to school planning; allow for greater ownership of specific responsibilities allocated to staff; actively support staff development related to the SDP, and provide a coherent framework within which to make decisions.

A WORKABLE APPROACH TO PLANNING?

These are impressive claims by the supporters of school development planning, and yet, with notable exceptions (Downes, 1991; Wallace, 1991a; Hutchinson, 1993), surprisingly few authors in the UK have challenged the appropriateness of this rational approach to site-based planning, or questioned the operational rather than strategic emphasis in the approach adopted by some school boards.

Other than research completed by the DES funded "School Development Planning Project" (op.cit.) at the outset of the LMS initiative, and four school-focused case studies referred to by

Wallace (1991b), there appears to have been little research reported in the literature on how successfully the SDP process has contributed to effective site-based planning in a decentralized environment, or the extent to which strategic planning at school level has developed as a result of the SDP approach.

AN UNDERCURRENT OF CONCERN

Sufficient time has elapsed since the introduction of the LMS initiative for there to be growing concern at the lack of strategic planning taking place in, what is now, a relatively experienced decentralized school system. Significantly, the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED), created by the 1992 Education Act to inspect schools on a four yearly cycle, has begun to take a more proactive role in shaping the strategic planning process in schools. As part of the OFSTED inspection process, schools are now required to produce their SDP, and a variety of other planning documents, in a format that provides evidence of a coherent planning process. Final OFSTED inspection reports now include:

> "A judgement on the quality of the school development plan, its usefulness as an instrument for change and development, its realism and the achievement of any priorities set." (OFSTED, 1992.)

Some of the early OFSTED inspection reports reviewed by Ormston and Shaw (1993) also indicate the need for this development, and agree with the 1993 School Teachers' Review Board (STRB) Report that:

"Too few schools concern themselves with strategic planning, linking curriculum priorities, the budget and staff development. Too few schools also involve all staff, particularly those with management responsibilities, in formulating policy and checking on its implementation in school development planning".

SITE-BASED PLANNING - PRELIMINARY RESEARCH

AIM OF THE RESEARCH

The aim of the research was to focus primarily upon the extent to which school development plans provide documentary evidence of a coherent strategic planning process in a decentralized educational environment. The research was based on a survey of a convenience sample of 106 students enrolled on a University graduate course in Education Management and Administration. The respondents were experienced teachers, holding a variety of middle and senior management positions in both primary and secondary schools. The teachers in question represented some 15 different school boards in the immediate vicinity of the University.

The researcher is aware that a non-probability sample was used as the basis of the research, and of the disadvantage of non-representativeness. However, it was never intended to generalise the findings beyond the sample in question, but rather to obtain indicative results as a prelude to a more detailed study.

The use of a questionnaire to focus on the SDP document allowed very precise questions to be asked about the strategic planning process which required yes, no, or don't know answers. Questions were based on the characteristics of an effective SDP process identified from the literature, and also recently promoted by

OFSTED (1992).

The questionnaire was piloted and modified to include a sheet of definitions which were needed to clarify the meaning of the terms strategic plan, school development plan and action plan. Respondents were asked not to refer to their SDPs as the literature stresses the importance of SDPs as working documents which have emerged from a collegiate and participatory planning process. Respondents should, in theory, have been entirely familiar with their SDP and the process by which it was produced.

Some 126 questionnaires were issued, of which 106 were returned, giving an 84% response rate.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

N=106

INDICATIVE CONCLUSIONS

Evidence of a Coherent Strategic Planning Process

Although most of the schools surveyed had SDPs (90%), these were frequently not supported by a long-term strategic plan for the school (58%) or systematically implemented by action plans (42%). Only 22% of respondents felt that their planning process made the difference between strategic planning and development planning clear, and 54% of respondents indicated that although plans existed throughout their school, they were not closely linked to each other.

The survey results also suggest that involvement in the planning process was very patchy. Senior staff (principals 71% and vice-principals 75%) and teachers (66%) dominated the

process, while key figures like governors (34%), parents (5%) and pupils (2%) were under-represented. Although 70% of respondents were involved in producing their development plans, a suprising number of respondents did not have a copy of their SDP (32%), or know their three key school development targets for 1993/94 (42%), which suggests that SDPs are far from being live working documents.

Six paired statements were included in the questionnaire to obtain a feel for the coherence of the planning process in the convenience sample. Although in hindsight a Likert scale might have been more appropriate for recording gradations of response, respondents were remarkably consistent in producing either a positive or negative response pattern for their school; 41% reported that plans in their school were produced by an ad hoc process, and 53% reported that there was no obvious planning cycle operating in their school.

Evidence of the Strategic Allocation, Use and Development of Resources

Respondents suggested that although there was a close link between their planning and the annual budgetary process (57%), the planning of resource utilisation was somewhat weak, in particular:

* resources were not allocated to clear costed priorities identified in the SDP (70%);
* schools lacked a systematic approach to monitoring and

evaluating progress (67%);

* there was a lack of focus on human resource management, with only 45% of respondents reporting that staff development priorities were linked to the SDP, and 38% reporting that SDPs indicated how staff development priorities were to be met.

Evidence of Systematic Implementation of Plans

Although 58% (61 respondents) of the schools surveyed had action plans, if the figures for schools without action plans are incorporated into the statistics along with the "don't know" answers, the crucial action planning element of the planning cycle seems to have only been partially implemented in a large number of cases. Schools are, therefore, unlikely to have in place effective control mechanisms to ensure implementation of their SDP. Of the schools surveyed, 36% had clear success criteria; 49% a timescale for completion; 46% named staff responsible for implementation; 51% had job descriptions that reflected planning responsibilities; 29% an indication of who would monitor or evaluate progress and 32% an indication of when monitoring or evaluation was to occur.

CONCLUSIONS

Although not generalisable to the school population as a whole, preliminary analysis of the results from this research suggests that in about half of the schools surveyed:

* planning seems ad hoc, with little whole-school strategic planning taking place;
* there appears to be little conscious link between the aims and objectives of the school identified in a strategic plan, and the use of resources to implement the priorities for change identified in the SDP;
* the SDP seems isolated from a strategic plan, as well as from action plans concerned with implementation;
* in about two thirds of the schools surveyed action plans are not complete enough to control implementation. As a result the SDP will, in effect, be a list of 'jobs to do', rather than agreed priorities which are being systematically resourced and implemented;
* systematic evaluation of progress towards policy implementation is noticeably lacking.

PLANNING AND THE FUTURE

These are important issues which need to be considered more openly if schools are to develop realistically the strategic planning skills necessary in an increasingly decentralized and competitive educational service. The recent thinking of the UK Government, outlined in the White Paper "Choice and Diversity" (HMSO, 1992), and legislated in the 1993 Education Act, has considerably enhanced the autonomy of schools by allowing them to apply to:

* change their character;

* specialise in terms of curriculum, and
* select pupils by ability.

In addition, schools will need to assess the strategic implications of the gradual demise of school boards, and their likely replacement from April 1994 by a Central Government body known as the Funding Agency for Schools (FAS). There are also open discussions in the media over the introduction of voucher schemes, and renewed pressures from Central Government for schools to opt out of local school board control and elect for centrally-funded grant maintained status.

Within these very clear centrally determined policy parameters, schools will have to decide individually their strategic direction in the educational marketplace, identify the type of school that they intend to become, and plan the range of services that they intend to provide for their various client groups.

If schools are to grasp the strategic initiative offered by further decentralization, a thorough review by Central Government may be needed of the likely system wide impact of their increasingly "laissez faire" attitudes towards site-based planning. Certainly a number of issues need to be considered:

* Is the school development planning approach to strategic site-based planning currently being promoted by OFSTED perhaps seriously flawed? Is not part of the problem that the strategic element of the development planning approach is under-emphasised?
* Is there a need for longer term support of the strategic

planning process in the early stages of decentralization, linked with the professional development of senior staff and teachers, so that the strategic capability of schools can be improved?

* Who is to provide that advice and support to improve the strategic capability of schools, and to help sustain progress towards more effective site-based planning?

Perhaps it is time after all to re-invent a strategic planning tier to guide and support site-based planning in schools, or at least enhance the strategic planning role of the Funding Agency for Schools? Or is the Government seriously saying that ultimately allowing 25,000 schools the freedom to choose independently their own strategic direction amongst the educational minefields of parental choice, diversity of provision, specialisation and selection by ability, will ultimately lead to improved education for all in England and Wales?

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